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ABSTRACT

A study is described which examined the relationships between law-related knowledge, attitudes, and demographic characteristics of high school students. Participants were 457 students in grades nine through 12 from four high schools near Phoenix, Arizona. Three questionnaires were administered: (1) a 65-item social attitude questionnaire on attitude variables including liberalism, authoritarianism, belief in a just world, and legal-social responsibility; (2) a 50-item criminal justice knowledge survey covering law, police, prisons, courts, and juvenile justice; and (3) self-reports of parental educational attainment and occupations and students' own expected level of educational attainment. Analysis of results showed that legal-social knowledge and attitudes are related, at least to a moderate degree. Low positive correlations were found between the knowledge measure and legal-social responsibility, educational expectations, socioeconomic status, and grade level. Significant sex differences appeared in attitudes of liberalism, legal-social responsibility, and authoritarianism. The authors suggest that a remaining research problem is the effect that attitudes of students entering law-related education programs have on knowledge acquisition. (AV)

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Law Related Education:

Assessing Adolescents' Knowledge and Attitudes

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Education is often viewed as an institution that socializes political knowledge, attitudes, and ideology (Hess & Torney, 1967). There is evidence that schooling influences acquisition of knowledge about the sociopolitical and legal system (Niemi, 1969: Merelman, 1971). However, evidence concerning the effects of schooling on attitudes and ideology is less clear (Niemi, 1969; Jennings & Niemi, 1974). Although educational goals often include attitudinal and developmental outcomes, evaluation of educational programs has most often focused on knowledge acquisition. Conceptualization and measurement of attitudinal and developmental variables have most often been informal or entirely neglected.

Educators may improve their conceptualizations and evaluations of the effects of law related educational programs if they attend to psychological research on adolescent political socialization, attitudes, and development. Although attachment to social groups and nations begins to develop quite early (Greenstein, 1965), major age-related changes in modes of thinking about social events occur during the early adolescent years (Gallatin & Adelson, 1971) and even into the adult years (Piaget, 1972). In adolescence, unlike earlier childhood, reasoning regarding social phenomena is restrained less by immediate, concrete events and the child is better able to deal with abstractions and with past and hypothetical future events. For example, the ability to reason adequately about principles of law and social systems of authority, rights, and equity first emerges during adolescence (Adelson, 1971). Whereas children and young adolescents generally see political authority as absolute and unchangeable, adolescents are often critical of laws, policies, and systems, sometimes to the point of advocating changes in the laws and legal systems. The emergence of formal thought about social events is associated with a decline in authoritarian attitudes about the political system (Gallatin & Adelson, 1971; Kohlberg & Elfenbein, 1975) and increases in liberalism and social responsibility (Eisenberg-Berg, 1976; Mussen, Sullivan, & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977).

Recently, legal-social education programs have been designed to facilitate the development of attitudes (Freund, 1973), social-cognitive reasoning (Hersh, Paolitto, & Reimer, 1979), and acceptance of citizenship and social responsibilities (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1979), as well as knowledge of laws and the criminal justice system. Although research and theory regarding social-cognitive development provide a framework for examining social-cognitive and attitudinal effects of law-related education programs, the relationships between knowledge acquisition, social-cognitive development, and attitude change have not been studied systematically. Further understanding of effects of socio-political curricula requires a focus on interrelationships of knowledge, cognitive development, and attitudes (Hoffman, 1970). If cognitive-developmental and attitudinal factors serve in part as conceptual bases for the curriculum, such variables should be formally considered in program evaluation. For example, we need to know whether students with greater knowledge and integration of concepts also manifest more positive attitudes toward the legal system.

There are several reasons to expect that knowledge and attitudes are related. First, curriculum and instruction in political and legal phenomena are often designed to influence a range of attitudes as well as knowledge. The extent of exposure to and assimilation of such instruction is likely to be reflected in the level of both types of variables. Second, it seems likely that increases in knowledge may be positively related to increasingly complex and reflective responses to social issues. The study of legal and social issues may make simple, reflexive, authoritarian responses less tenable. Conversely, attitudes may affect the acquisition of knowledge. Those with strong authoritarian attitudes may not be receptive to new knowledge. Information that is incompatible with existing attitudes may be difficult to assimilate, and may therefore be rejected.

The present study examined relationships among measures of law-related knowledge, attitudes, and demographic variables. The measure of knowledge of

law and the criminal justice system contained questions pertaining to basic concepts of law, police, courts, corrections, and juvenile justice. The attitudinal variables included liberalism, authoritarianism, belief in a just world, and legal-social responsibility. Demographic variables included self reports of expected level of educational attainment and social-economic status as reflected by parents' educational attainments and occupations. The influence of grade level was also examined.

Method

Students (N = 457) in four high schools in a city near Phoenix, Arizona participated in testing sessions in social studies classes in grades 9-12. The number of subjects in each analysis reported reflects use of pairwise deletion in statistical analyses. The majority (79%) of the sample was Caucasian (white); 12% was Mexican-American; and about 4% was Black; 2% was Indian, and 3% was from other ethnic groups. Females comprised 45% of the sample; males 55%. The sample was heterogeneous with respect to parental education and family income level.

Measures

A 65-item social-attitudes questionnaire was compiled for the study. Responses to the questions were structured in a four-level Likert-type format (agree, partly agree, partly disagree, or disagree). Items for the questionnaire were selected from four scales: Liberalism (Eisenberg, 1976, modified from Mussen, Sullivan, & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977) Just World (Rubin & Peplau, 1975), Authoritarianism (25 items selected from several authoritarian personality scales cited in Robinson and Shaver, 1969), and Legal-Social Responsibility (items from Berkowitz and Lutterman's 1968 Social Responsibility Scale and items created for this study by the authors).

Items were selected for use in the present study on the basis of high internal consistency reliability in a previous study (Nelsen, Eisenberg-Berg, & Carroll, in press). The knowledge measure, Criminal Justice Knowledge

Survey, was developed by Nelsen, Carroll and Sbragia (Note 1) in collaboration with social studies techers and professors of criminal justice and law. The 50 questions surveyed students' knowledge of law, police, prisons, courts, juvenile justice and other aspects of the criminal justice system. The socioeconomic status measure was comprised of the combined reports of father's occupation and father's and mother's educational attainment. Self-reports of the student's expected level of educational attainment were also obtained from the questionnaire.

Procedures

The questionnaires were administered to students during regularly scheduled class periods. Data were collected by project staff and graduate assistents who were not familiar to students or teachers. All response forms were coded to maintain subject anonymity.

Results

Internal consistency reliability coefficients, number of items, and number of subjects for the scales were: Liberalism (16 items, N = 381, Coefficient Alpha = .72), Legal Social Responsibility (12 items, N = 396, Coefficient Alpha = .77), Authoritarianism (25 items, N = 372, Coefficient Alpha = .76), Just World (12 items, N = 386, Coefficient Alpha = .41), Criminal Justice Knowledge Information Survey (50 items, N = 457, KR-20, Mdn = .86, range = .80 to .89). Tests of sex differences for each scale are reported in Table 1. Females scored higher on the Liberalism and Legal-Social Responsibility Scale and lower on the Authoritarianism Scale. Table 2 reports the intercorrelations of four attitude scales, the Criminal Justice Knowledge Survey, grade level, educational expectations, and S.E.S. The shared variance accounted for by the knowledge measure and each attitude scale taken independently was: Knowledge and Liberalism, r^2 = .02; Knowledge and Legal-Social Responsibility, r^2 = .07; Knowledge and Authoritarianism, r^2 = .19; Knowledge and Just World, r^2 = .01. Table 3 presents

the intercorrelation of all variables with the sample divided by sex. Multiple regression analysis with Criminal Justice Knowledge Survey score as the dependent variable indicated that all other variables accounted for 31.6% of the variance (R^2). All attitude scales combined to account for 23.9% of the variance. Four variables contributed significantly to a step down analysis solution. Authoritarianism (R^2 = .215, Educational Expectations (Cumulative R^2 = .272) Grade Level (Cumulative R^2 = .296), and SES (Cumulative R^2 = .307).

Discussion

A curriculum based measure of law-related knowledge was shown to be moderately related to Authoritarianism. Low positive correlations were also obtained between the knowledge measure and Legal-Social Responsibility, educational expectations, SES, and grade level. Reliability coefficients were satisfactory for research purposes for all measures except the Just World scale. Although Liberalism, Legal-Social Responsibility, and Authoritarianism yielded statistically significant sex differences (Table 1), the patterns of correlations between measures for males and females are comparable (Table 3).

According to the correlation matrix and multiple regression analyses, law related knowledge in the present sample is best predicted by non-authoritarian attitudes, and educational expectations significantly improve this prediction. Most of the variance in knowledge test scores accounted for by other attitude scales is shared with Authoritarianism. Expectations of low but significant correlations between age (grade) and attitudes were confirmed, e.g., Authoritarianism decreased with age. Socioeconomic status, at least as we measured it, contributed minimally to variance in knowledge of law and the criminal justice system.

The present evidence suggests that legal-social knowledge and attitudes are related, at least to a moderate degree. It does not address questions of

sequentially or causality although these issues should be major concerns of developers and evaluators of law related education programs. There are several possible effects of attitudes on knowledge acquisition and of knowledge acquisitio on attitudes. The most frequently raised issue has been whether legal-social attitudes change as students acquire knowledge about legal-social systems and problems. Another concern should be what effect attitudes of students entering law related education programs have on knowledge acquisition. Some programs may only be effective for individuals who, from the start, hold certain attitudes. Examination of these issues depends upon development of content-specific and age-appropriate measures of law-related concepts, knowledge, and attitudes.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Males and Females on Law Related Knowledge and Attitudes Measures

	Male			Female			t
	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	
Liberalism	205	53.6	6.0	166	55.1	6.4	2.3*
Legal Social Responsibility	210	37.0	6.0	173	39.6	5.1	4.5**
Authoritarianism	199	40.8	9.0	162	36.6	9.7	4.3**
Just World	203	32.3	4.2	171	33.1	4.0	1.8
Law Related Knowledge	208	21.7	3.1	175	22.2	3.0	1.7

* $p < .05$ two-tailed tests

** $p < .01$

Table 2

Intercorrelations Among Political and Law-Related Attitudes and Knowledge Measures

	Liberalism	Legal-Social Responsibility	Authoritarianism	Just World	Law-Related Knowledge	Grade Level	Educ. Expectations
Liberalism							
Legal-Social Responsibility	.05						
Authoritarianism	-.37***	-.39***					
Just World	.00	.23***	.12*				
Law-Related Knowledge	.15*	.27***	-.44***	-.09			
Grade Level	-.02	.14**	-.16**	-.05	.22***		
Educ. Expectations	.06	.25***	-.20***	-.07	.33***	.25***	
SES	-.05	.17***	-.17**	-.09	.26***	.22***	.32***

*p <.05 two-tailed tests
** <.01
***p <.001

N = 238 to 384, pairwise deletion

Table 3

Intercorrelations Among Political and Law-Related Attitudes and Knowledge Measures for Males and Females

	Liberalism	Legal-Social Responsibility	Authoritarianism	Just World	Law-Related Knowledge	Grade Level	Educ. Expectations	SES
Liberalism	-	-.02	-.42***	-.17*	.16	-.12	.07	-.14
Legal Social Responsibility	.09	-	-.38***	.11	.28**	.18*	.23**	.26***
Authoritarianism	-.31***	-.35***	-	.20*	-.52***	-.10	-.29***	-.18*
Just World	.09	.32***	.05	-	-.24*	-.14	-.15	-.15
Law-Related Knowledge	.16*	.31***	-.44***	.01	-	.19*	.39***	.30***
Grade Level	.07	.11	-.23***	-.06	.24**	-	.20*	.21**
Educ. Expectations	.09	.30***	-.12	.04	.26**	.32***	-	.30***
SES	-.02	.11	-.15*	-.05	.20*	.23***	.36***	-

* p <.05 two-tailed tests
** p <.01
*** p <.001

Females above diagonal, N = 108 to 174, pairwise deletion
Males below diagonal, N = 129 to 210, pairwise deletion

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